

Pop-up shelters

A pilot project aimed at reducing Oahu's homeless will start in Waipahu

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A hub for homeless services will go up in the middle of Waipahu Cultural Garden Park — home to Hawaii's Plantation Village.

At the same time, within a 5-mile radius, a zero tolerance for illegal homeless activity also will go into effect.

City and state officials are trying a new, two-pronged strategy to deal with homelessness on Oahu by opening a temporary, all-in-one “navigation center” and imposing a crackdown on any violations in the vicinity.

The idea is to offer a wide-range of social services in the middle of Waipahu Cultural Garden Park while getting tough on any violations outside of the newly named “Homeless Outreach and Navigation for Unsheltered Persons” — or HONU.

Councilman Brandon Elefante, who represents the area, called the possibility of future citations and even arrests outside of the HONU “critical.”

“But we also want to make this a successful model where people within that 5 miles might consider going into this HONU zone,” Elefante said. “Obviously, things we’re

doing now aren’t enough.”

The HONU will be made out of military- grade, inflatable structures that will stay up no longer than 90 days before they’re broken down, said Pam Witty-Oakland, director of the city’s



Evelyn Ahlo, executive director of Hawaii's Plantation Village, shows the grassy area where a temporary pop-up homeless shelter will be built at the Waipahu Cultural Garden Park. She estimates there are currently a couple dozen homeless people living on the Ewa and Diamond Head edges of the park.

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Department of Community Services.

City and state officials told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser last week that they hope to have the necessary equipment on island in November before the first HONU project goes up in early December.

After the 90-day period ends in Waipahu — or sooner depending on the needs of the area's homeless — the goal is to set up a second HONU next spring in another city park somewhere in the urban core, said Marc Alexander, director of the city's Office of Housing.

The new HONU idea brings together many of the practices currently in place to make it easier for homeless people to take the first step to get off the street, such as kennel space where they can keep their pets, which are not allowed in traditional homeless shelters.

The three-year pilot project is budgeted to cost \$6 million and will come from the \$30 million in so-called ohana zone funding that was previously approved by state legislators, said Scott Morishige, the state's homeless coordinator.

Witty-Oakland said the second HONU should not be adjacent to a school and should not be installed where it would restrict outdoor park activities.

Overall homeless numbers on Oahu have dropped 10% since 2017. But the number of unsheltered homeless people jumped 12% in the latest annual January nationwide homeless census called the Point in Time Count.

As a state, Hawaii continues to have the highest per capita rate of homelessness in the nation.

Elefante supports the first HONU in his district, which he called “an area entrenched with homeless folks.”

“I’m very supportive of the concept,” Elefante said.

“It’s really innovative and I’m looking forward to seeing it be successful.”

The idea was born out of frustration when then-Honolulu Police Department Lt. Mike Lambert said HPD officers had few options to deal with homelessness in District 1, which runs from Liliha to Kalakaua Avenue in Waikiki.

“All we did was enforcement and it just wasn’t working,” said Lambert, who is now an HPD captain leading the department’s homeless efforts. “It was also unfair because there weren’t any services.”

Lambert came up with the idea for a 50-yard-by-50-yard temporary navigation center on his own and did not base the HONU concept on any other model.

“It’s never been done before,” he said. “It’s the first of its kind in the nation.”

Most of the money — \$5 million — will be spent on staffing, including an increased HPD presence in the HONU. The other \$1 million will be spent on hardware, including inflatable, water-resistant, wind-resistant structures that are scheduled to be delivered in November from Florida, said HPD Sgt. Joseph “Dan” O’Neal, who is working with Lambert on the HONU project.

The first HONU will utilize the successful “Hiehie” hygiene trailer operated by Project Vision Hawaii that offers hot showers and bathrooms to homeless people across Oahu as a portal to connect them to additional services, including housing.

Officials plan to augment future HONUs with an additional, new hygiene trailer, which also will include a clothes washer and dryer, Witty-Oakland said.

Waipahu Cultural Garden Park was selected, in part, because there is no homeless shelter in the area after Waipahu Lighthouse Outreach Center closed in early 2017, Morishige said.

Officials also want to test the HONU concept in Waipahu before moving to a city park in the more dense urban core, where they are likely to see bigger numbers of homeless people accessing the services offered by nonprofit organizations.

Evelyn Ahlo, executive director of Hawaii’s Plantation Village, said a couple dozen homeless people live on the Ewa and Diamond Head edges of the park, which attracts more than 20,000 visitors and school children every year.